

THE PROGRESSIVE POTENTIAL OF THE EU

The FEPS Primer Series

Following a decade of polycrisis that followed the great recession of 2009, progressive political thinking and practice in Europe needs a reconstruction. This FEPS Primer book series was launched to serve the creation of this new synthesis, connecting long established values of the European socialist and social democratic traditions with the lessons and innovations of the current experience.

Primers are booklets written with an educational purpose, to help new (typically young) audiences enter specific thematic fields, which can be diverse (in this case social science, politics, and policy). Accessible language is important, together with illustrations that highlight key elements of the content. The main text is always accompanied by a glossary as well as a section of recommended further reading.

The FEPS Primers are parts of a broader effort: the Foundation endeavours to raise progressive political education in Europe to a new level. Our volumes aim to provide useful analysis, instruction, and orientation for several years after publication. Some of them may well be considered ‘must reads’ for all those aspiring to play an active role in European politics at any level.

Our authors are not only recognised experts, but also active participants in political and policy debates, representing a diversity of European nations and career paths. However, they are connected by sharing the values and objectives of the progressive political family and concerns for the future of European societies, as well as sustainability and social cohesion as common goals.

The FEPS Primer series is edited by an Editorial Board. We keep in view the key current issues of the European Union, with a focus on critical discussion points that will influence the work of social movements as well as governance at various levels in the coming decade. We hope the selection of topics and the contributions of our distinguished authors will spark the interest of those participating in progressive political education, and also appeal to a wider readership.

Dr László Andor
FEPS Secretary General

Richard Corbett

THE PROGRESSIVE POTENTIAL OF THE EU

What the EU is, why it matters, how it works,
and how the centre-left can use it and reform it



FEPS
Primer Series



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Foreword

Speaking about the European Union's institutions and competencies in an imaginative, captivating way is a form of art. It takes passion, conviction, and technique. It requires a balancing act, reuniting the dry language of treaties with meaningful words articulating people's dreams for a better future. And it takes the speaker's courage to go off the beaten track, not merely retelling the EU's existing competencies but pointing to a remaining potential that, if fulfilled, could bring the Union to yet another level. It is in view and in honour of all potential readers who would like to acquire and develop this aptitude that we are thrilled to present this very first FEPS primer: *The Progressive Potential of the EU. What the EU is, why it matters, how it works, and how the centre-left can use it and reform it* by Richard Corbett.

This first volume in the primer series begins with a journey back to the late 1940s and early 1950s. The author recounts the familiar facts of how the European Communities came to exist against the backdrop of the tragic experience of World War II, thanks to a shared understanding that all efforts should be directed towards rebuilding and ensuring that armed conflicts would become a thing of the past. But what makes the primer exceptional from chapter one is its focus on social democrats and socialists. Their vision, their concerns, their in-put – in short, their political legacy in the EU – is brought to the lime-light. This is in welcome contrast to mainstream publications which tend to pass over instances of political leadership and contestation while skipping from the founding fathers to later conferences. Corbett's book corrects the record and consistently, throughout the chapters, underlines how much ideological differences matter in EC, and now EU, politics. In that narrative, he also shows how much effort it takes, and what an achievement it is, to reach agreement in the multi-stakeholder community. Corbett explains that the logic of the Union's institutional structure leaves decision-makers with two

kinds of political allegiance: to their respective political families and towards the country they come from. He argues convincingly that combining both is not a contradiction, contrary to what Eurosceptics and anti-European parties would like citizens to believe.

This is one among several core arguments that Corbett conveys while comprehensively tracing the EU's evolutionary developments, analysing the nature of crises, and highlighting ground-breaking decisions that kept European integration moving forward. He looks at the competencies that the EU acquired, the policies it defines, and the institutional structure on which it relies. The catalogue of issues that he covers is an empowering resource, as it may allow us to imagine and begin a different kind of conversation about the EU. After all, even EU-level operatives, who are fluent in so-called 'Brussels jargon' and know their specific dossiers like the back of their own hand, tend to be anxious about the moments in which they are confronted with interlocutors outside of that particular bubble. Indeed, this hesitancy to communicate may form part of a kind of vicious cycle in which stereo-types lead citizens to believe that talking about the EU institutions is elitist and dull. At the same time, those in a position to frame those debates stay under the impression that the general public knows very little about the Union. This may lead to the assumption that, before entering the substance, citizens crave detailed instructions on governing procedures to understand how the EU works (and excuses for certain deficiencies and limitations). Clearly, this communication strategy is not conducive to creating a connection. An improved connection between the EU and its citizens is, however, very much desirable for European democracy to work better in its representative, deliberative and participatory aspects. Against this background, the bridge that the author provides between what is close to the heart of institutionalists and what may be more appealing to experts of the other disciplines, alongside the guidelines on how to break out of those mutually dis-empowering prejudices, are compelling reasons making this book a meaningful read – amid the Conference on the Future of Europe, ahead of the next European elections and in fact, at any given moment now and in the future.

Furthermore, Richard Corbett is an outstanding academic with an impressive record of scholarly publications that explain the European Union. But he is also a practitioner who throughout his years of service as a Member of the European Parliament and as Chair of the European Parliamentary Labour Party has been involved in shaping a number of public policies. Having had to argue in favour of various bold proposals inside the EP's Committee of Constitutional Affairs, in the plenary, and while campaigning in the UK pre-Brexit, he is an author grounded in political reality who effortlessly translates abstract concepts into the framework of tangible policy solutions. Corbett shows how the conversation about the EU and its institutional reform can become an exciting exchange among diverse interlocutors with vastly diverging takes on both grand visions and minute details. He presents a variety of anchoring points allowing people of very diverse backgrounds to connect with what they might have thought of as distant issues. A great example of that is the entire Chapter 5, where Corbett shows how fundamental some current discussions in the EU are: on the veto power in the Council, the institution of *spitzenkandidaten*, the introduction of the transnational lists, or the reform of the European Citizens Initiative. That is, they will prove fundamental if we are indeed serious about reinforcing the Union when it comes to democratic criteria of accountability and legitimacy.

To that end, the primer by Richard Corbett is designed in such a way that it can be read from cover to cover, but also as a reference source regarding specific topics. The reader will therefore find inside: a record number of concrete examples on the institutional challenges of the EU which can be used instead of the traditional, but somewhat dry narrative about the 'treaty reform of the EU'; a number of info boxes providing snapshots of rudimentary knowledge; a glossary and, finally, a list of progressive personalities whose contributions are at the heart of significant developments in the EU's history. Consequently, this is a volume that complements and completes readers' knowledge about the EU, and also equips them with a set of skills. It is written so that it can provide inspiration for any debate, at any key moment, and in diverse political contexts. As

such, we are convinced that it not only delivers upon the promise the concept of a primer entails but also offers an essential contribution to empowering progressives with thought-provoking ideas and arguments thanks to which they can master the experts' conversations about the EU and set a new qualitative standard for citizen dialogue.

Dr Ania Skrzypek
FEPS Director for Research and Training

1 Introduction

The interdependence (economic, environmental and political) of European countries means that political choices need to be made – and political battles fought – not just at national, regional and local levels, but at European level too.

Whether we like it or not, this interdependence means that a growing number of problems can only be adequately addressed jointly.

The EU is the primary framework for organising joint action at European level. It involves almost all countries in Western and Central Europe (and those that aren't in it often choose to, or have to, follow its rules). It has a significant capacity to adopt common legislation and has a common budget. The policies, legislation and decisions taken by the EU are of considerable importance in many fields (as we will see later).

The most significant of these is the EU's single market, which is the world's largest market: how it is regulated, shaped, managed, directed and corrected is of central importance. On the centre-left, we know that a market with no rules, a corporate free-for-all, would be a disaster. Markets need to be corrected and shaped in the public interest.

Most such corrections are at national level: redistribution of income, universal provision of healthcare and education, the welfare state, and much else. But it is largely at EU level that we adopt legislation to protect consumers, to guarantee workers' rights, to protect the environment and to regulate large companies, especially multi-national ones, and to ensure fair competition without exploitative monopolies.

The political battle to make sure the European market has such rules has been fought over many years. Crucially, the fact that it is very difficult to adopt any legislation at EU level without the approval of the S&D Group in the European Parliament (EP), or without the agreement of socialist-led governments in the Council, has

meant that a grand bargain was struck: the harmonising legislation needed to create a cross-border market at EU level was only accepted if it contained (or was accompanied by) protective and corrective legislation and entrenched workers' rights.

Certainly, some of that EU legislation in these fields could be better and needs strengthening. But it is already significant enough to deeply antagonise right-wing neo-liberals. They are going all-out to not just prevent any new legislation of this kind, but to undo what exists. They were also the driving force behind Brexit. The ideological battles at EU level are hotting up.

Political conflict is also hotting up in another field: basic values. While some initially saw the EU as a purely economic transactional relationship among countries, the centre-left saw it as a values-based union. Indeed, the EU treaties now (thanks in no small part to successful battles won by the centre-left) set out very clearly the values and aims of the Union (see Box 1).

There can be no doubt that the Union, and all its Member States in their sovereign decisions to ratify the treaties, signed up to these values and objectives. But it is equally clear that some political forces and some national governments are seeking to escape from these obligations. Some of them even challenge the basic legal order of the EU and the respect of the rule of law that all Member States are required to uphold.

There are many other fields in which political battles are being fought at European level. And, of course, the EU itself isn't perfect. Its focus is sometimes wrong, it often lacks the necessary tools to deliver, its procedures can be cumbersome, and its democratic accountability is not visible enough.

Just as we fight to change policies and reform structures at national level, the same is needed at EU level. That can be more complicated, and is at times vulnerable to misunderstandings and misconceptions, but it must be done. And whether that is about defending values, promoting progressive policies, pooling resources to achieve economies of scale, deploying greater leverage in international affairs, or simply showing solidarity, we can often achieve more together than we can separately.